

## eye Music

# Quartet hits quarter-century mark

St. Lawrence debuts yet another Adams work written for them

By Richard Scheinin

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String quartets are a lot like bad marriages, according to common wisdom — hotbeds of jealousy and breakdown, holding on for dear life. If you saw the 2012 film “A Late Quartet,” with actors Philip Seymour Hoffman and Catherine Keener as members of one such dysfunctional quartet, you will understand the notion.

There are real-life examples, too, open secrets in the classical music world. But the St. Lawrence String Quartet comes from a more functional planet. Now in its 25th season — and debuting composer John Adams’ “Second Quartet” this weekend at Stanford University’s Bing Concert Hall — the St. Lawrence is more like a marriage that works, that takes risks and therefore rejuvenates.

For that kind of longevity, says first violinist Geoff Nuttall, “You want to keep the edge, where at any moment you could fall apart, where you have the sense of improvement and discovery that you had when you were younger.”

Adams, the Berkeley-based Pulitzer Prize winner — widely considered the preeminent American composer of our era — appreciates that quality in the St. Lawrence. The group is famous for its technical aplomb, but also for the grit and spark of its performances. This is the third piece that Adams has composed for the St. Lawrence, which has been in residence at Stanford since 1998. He calls it his “favorite chamber group” and has come to

## ST. LAWRENCE STRING QUARTET

Performing world premiere of “Second Quartet” by John Adams; program also features works by Haydn and Beethoven

**When:** 7 p.m. Jan. 18

**Where:** Bing Concert Hall, Stanford University

**Tickets:** \$30-\$75; 650-724-2464, <http://live.stanford.edu>

regard it as a collaborator.

He isn’t a string player himself. He finds the act of composing for strings to be “humbling” and has written this about the Stanford-based quartet: “What I appreciate about my friends in the St. Lawrence is their willingness to let me literally ‘improvise’ on them as if they were a piano or a drum and I a crazy man beating away with only the roughest outlines of what I want. They will go the distance with me, allow me to try and fail, and they will indulge my seizures of doubt, frustration and indecision, all the while providing intuitions and frequently brilliant suggestions of their own.”

Nuttall says Adams is being self-deprecating.

But he agrees that the St. Lawrence has become a sounding board for the composer. “He’s like a kid in the candy shop” during rehearsals, Nuttall says. “We went to his house in Berkeley and spent a good four hours on the first part of the new quartet, and he’s like, ‘Oh, this is cool — let’s try it this way.’ It totally transformed the way we were approaching it.

“John knows what he wants,” Nuttall goes on, “but he’s totally open to possibilities. He has that perfect balance of having confidence in his ability and what he wants



ST. LAWRENCE STRING QUARTET

St. Lawrence String Quartet members Mark Fewer, left, Lesley Robertson, Geoff Nuttall and Christopher Costanza will premiere John Adams’ “Second Quartet.”

to say, but also then having the ability to be transformative and to change on the fly. We’ll say, ‘Hey, what if we do this, John?’ And he’ll say no. He knows what’s going to work.”

Symphony orchestras, for whom Adams, 67, has composed many of his best-known works, offer limited time for rehearsal, typically just two or three sessions before a world premiere. Opera companies, for whom Adams has composed several major pieces — including “Nixon in China,” “Doctor Atomic” and “The Death of Klinghoffer” — don’t do a whole lot better, given the vast dimensions of those undertakings.

In situations such as those, points out St. Lawrence cellist Christopher Costanza, “There’s barely any time for back-and-forth” discussions between the composer and the many musicians. (The St. Lawrence’s other two members are violinist Mark Fewer, who joined the group this

season, replacing Scott St. John, and violist Lesley Robertson who, with Nuttall, is a founding member.)

“But with the quartet, we can just sit there for hours every time,” says Costanza (who is in his 12th season with the group), “and John is jumping up and down with excitement, and it’s so thrilling to see that. I mean, he’s one of the composer gods, right?”

During its 25 seasons, the St. Lawrence has established strong working relationships with a number of composers: R. Murray Schafer (from Canada, where the St. Lawrence was born in 1989), Osvaldo Golijov (from Argentina, Israel and for many years now the United States) and Jonathan Berger (the American composer and Stanford professor who has composed more music for the St. Lawrence than anyone else). In April, the group will premiere a new work for string quartet and percussion by Stanford

composer Jaroslav Kapuscinski.

Adams’ first foray into writing for string quartets came in 1994, when he brought forth “John’s Alleged Book of Dances,” a collection of 10 dances, six incorporating a prerecorded percussion track made of prepared piano sounds. Adams attended a performance of that piece by the St. Lawrence at Stanford in 2007, part of a program that also included Beethoven’s Op. 132 quartet in A minor.

Especially elated by the group’s Beethoven performance, Adams marched backstage after the concert and announced, “I want to write you guys a string quartet.”

Costanza remembers standing there in shock and saying, “Are you kidding?” It didn’t take long. In 2009 at the Juilliard School in New York, the group premiered Adams’ String Quartet, now known as “First Quartet.” It is structured in two

movements, the first about 20 minutes long, intensely motoric, zooming along with what Costanza describes as “popcorn energy.”

Then in 2012, as part of the San Francisco Symphony’s 100th anniversary celebrations, Adams composed his concertolike “Absolute Jest” for the orchestra and the St. Lawrence. The piece uses tiny fragments of Beethoven compositions, including the Op. 131 and 135 string quartets, as a form of musical DNA that gets elaborated and transformed. (Later this year, the piece will be released on CD by the San Francisco Symphony, with Michael Tilson Thomas conducting and the St. Lawrence in the solo role.)

“Second Quartet,” which the St. Lawrence unveils Sunday during the Stanford Live program at Bing, uses a similar strategy. It draws on more bits of Beethoven, from his late Op. 110 piano sonata and the Diabelli Variations. And like the “First Quartet,” it is organized in two movements, though Costanza says the new work’s opening movement is unique — “quite beautiful and melodic and heartfelt ..., more rounded and sweeping and flowing, with less edge” than the “popcorn” beginning to the 2009 work.

Yet the new piece has its own “brain speed” rhythmic challenges, too, says Nuttall. “It’s super cool. It’s totally manic, incredibly exciting.... And that’s very John, and that’s very Beethoven, for that matter. That’s why they get along so well.”

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